

# Brenda Van Coppenolle: “Random selection to open up the political system?”

My name is Brenda Van Coppenolle, I am a political scientist and I just joined Sciences Po and the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics as a Senior Research Fellow.

## Tell us about your academic career

Previously, I was an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Essex in the UK, and at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

And before that, I obtained my PhD from the LSE, the London School of Economics and Political Science, during which I was also a visitor at New York University. I was also a postdoctoral fellow of quantitative methodology in LSE.

My PhD research was on political dynasties —or families in politics—and elections.

Many people think that relatives in politics are not much more than a fascinating curiosity but I think that political dynasties can still serve as an important measure of political inequality at the top level.

## What is your current research about?

As a result of studying the inequalities that elections can break or engender and reproduce, I also became interested in alternative selection mechanisms.

And one such mechanism is lottery, or random selection. In recent years, for example, random selection has been used to draw citizens into assemblies to discuss urgent issues such as climate change. Here in France, you had “la convention citoyenne pour le climat”. In the 19th century, lotteries were used in elected parliaments, to review legislation and constitutional drafts, as well as to select decision-makers. But such procedures have never before been studied in detail, or in a comparative perspective.

So in the next few years, I will be leading a research project supported by a Starting Grant from the European Research Council. And I will be studying examples of the use of such lotteries in parliaments when democracies were just emerging in Europe.

I want to understand how the use of alternative selection mechanisms can contribute to opening up the political system to newcomers, and whether it can contribute to decreasing inequalities over time. Just as important is the question of whether lotteries can do so again today.

## Why did you choose Sciences Po and the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics for this project?

I chose to join the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics because it is a naturally suitable environment to this research project. The project finds a great home here, among many experts in parliamentary politics and legislative studies, quantitative and qualitative research methods, experiments, political parties, and elections.

Sciences Po brings together many experts in different disciplines such as politics, economics, history, law and sociology.

The research I will be doing involves learning from European history to apply innovations today. It is quantitative in nature but needs to be very sensitive to the qualitative interpretations of the context and the politics at the time.

And therefore, this research will really benefit from the richness of insights and knowledge available at this world-leading university.

I am looking forward to engaging with colleagues and students interested in these topics of how selection and conversation can affect democratic decision-making processes and political outcomes, both in the past and today.

*Interview by Véronique Etienne, Knowledge Exchange Officer,  
Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics*